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ABSTRACT

This digest examines problems inherent in the traditional school scheduling pattern. It offers block scheduling as an option and describes variations in block schedules. It then looks at the benefits and challenges of block scheduling and concludes with a few suggestions for making the transition. Proponents argue that block scheduling allows for a more flexible and productive classroom environment, creates opportunities for instructional innovation, reduces suspension and dropout rates, and improves student-teacher relationships. The biggest challenges are building support for the change and finding planning time. To be successful, the change must address a need, fit the teachers' situation, be focused, and include concrete strategies. (LMI)

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Block Scheduling

by Karen Irmsher

Six classes a day, five days a week, every day the same schedule.

Telephones and radios were still novelties when high schools nationwide petrified the school day into this rigid pattern. The refrigerator and television hadn't been invented, much less the copy machine, computer, and video player.

We live in a very different world now, and we know immeasurably more about how students learn. Yet most contemporary high school and middle school students are still locked into the same archaic schedule that their great-grandparents experienced when they were teenagers.

This Digest looks at problems inherent in the traditional scheduling pattern. Then it examines the benefits and challenges of block scheduling, and ends with a few tips for making the transition.

What's Wrong with the Traditional Six- or Seven-Period Day?

For starters, say critics, the pace is grueling. A typical student will be in nine locations pursuing nine different activities in a six-and-a-half-hour school day. An average teacher must teach five classes, dealing with 125-180 students and multiple preparations. This frantic, fragmented schedule is unlike any experienced either before or after high school.

"It produces a hectic, impersonal, inefficient instructional environment," states Joseph Carroll (1994), provides inadequate time for probing ideas in depth, and tends to discourage using a variety of learning activities. Opportunities for individualization of instruction and meaningful interaction between students and teachers are hard to come by.

No matter how complex or simple the school subject, the schedule assigns an impartial national average of fifty-one minutes per class period, say Robert Canady and Michael Rettig (1995). And despite wide variation in the time it takes individual students to succeed at learning any given task, the allocated time is identical for all.

The 1994 report of the National Education Commission on Time and Learning states, "Schools will have a design flaw as long as their organization is based on the assumption that all students can learn on the same schedule."

In addition, since most disciplinary problems occur during scheduled transitions, the more transitions, the more problems. And a great deal of time is lost in simply starting and ending so many classes in a day.

"Traditional, inflexible scheduling is based on administrative and institutional needs," say Gary Watts and Shari Castle (1993). Flexible scheduling patterns are a much better match for pedagogical practices that meet the educational needs of students and the professional needs of teachers.

What Is Block Scheduling?

Gordon Cawelti (1994) defines it as follows: "At least part of the daily schedule is organized into larger blocks of time (more than sixty minutes) to allow flexibility for a diversity of instructional activities."

The variations are endless, and may involve reconfiguring the lengths of terms as well as the daily schedule. Some of the possibilities detailed by Canady and Rettig include:

- Four ninety-minute blocks per day; school year divided into two semesters; former year-long courses completed in one semester.
- Alternate day block schedule: six or eight courses spread out over two days; teachers meet with half of their students each day.
- Two large blocks and three standard-sized blocks per day; year divided into sixty-day trimesters with a different subject taught in the large blocks each trimester.
- Some classes (such as band, typing, foreign language) taught daily, others in longer blocks on alternate days.
- Six courses, each meeting in three single periods, and one double period per week.
- Seven courses. Teachers meet with students three days out of four—twice in single periods, once in a double period.

And there are many more. Any of these can be modified, of course, to meet the specific needs of a school.

Scheduling changes are usually linked to decreased reliance on the standard lecture-discussion-seatwork pattern, and an increase in individualization and creative teaching strategies. They are often part of a major restructuring effort.

What Are the Advantages of Block Scheduling?

Larger blocks of time allow for a more flexible and productive classroom environment, along with

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more opportunities for using varied and interactive teaching methods. Other benefits listed by Jeffrey Sturgis (1995) include: more effective use of school time, decreased class size, increased number of course offerings, reduced numbers of students with whom teachers have daily contact, and the ability of teachers to use more process-oriented strategies.

In evaluations of schools using block scheduling, Carroll found more course credits completed, equal or better mastery and retention of material, and an impressive reduction in suspension and dropout rates. He posits improved relationships between students and teachers as a major factor. Every school in Carroll's study benefited from the changes, though not all in the same ways or to the same degree.

Positive outcomes multiply when four "year-long" courses are taught in longer time blocks, each compressed into one semester, say Canady and Rettig. This pattern allows students to enroll in a greater number and variety of elective courses and offers more opportunities for acceleration. Students who fail a course have an earlier opportunity to retake it, enabling them to regain the graduation pace of their peers.Teachers have fewer students to keep records and grades for each semester, and schools require fewer textbooks. What's more, overall satisfaction in the learning process is greater for both students and teachers.

What Are Its Challenges?

All change is painful, say Gerald Strock and David Hottenstein (1994), and often controversial. The process of making the transition is probably the biggest challenge: building support for altering such a time-honored tradition, and finding/creating the planning time needed to make the change.

"Imposing a scheduling model on a school will not ensure success," states the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (1990). The lab recommends a minimum of two year's planning time before implementation, to make sure the new schedule meets the needs of all concerned.

Adequate staff development time is also essential, say Canady and Rettig. Teachers who have taught in thirty-five to fifty-minute time blocks for years need help in gaining the necessary strategies and skills to teach successfully in large blocks of time.

They observe that teachers who are most successful in block scheduling typically plan lessons in three parts: explanation, application, and synthesis. Most teachers have much less experience with the latter two phases than with the first. Teachers may also need training in cooperative learning, class building, and team formation.

What Advice Do Experts Have for Making the Change?

Before instituting major schedule changes, it's desirable to have a common vision, a good plan, and strong support of all stakeholders, says Carroll. Ideally, the superintendent, school board, principals, teachers, students, and parents should all be provided with opportunities to learn about the proposed innovations, and have plenty of chances to discuss the ramifications.

Canady and Rettig suggest the following:

- A general presentation regarding the pros and cons of various models of block scheduling
- Visits by teachers, students, parents, and school board members to schools having block schedules
- Panel presentations by teachers from schools operating block schedules
- Faculty discussion meetings, leading to a vote or consensus
- Parent and community meetings
- Assemblies for students conducted by students from other schools or by their peers who have visited other schools
- Distribution of relevant research data and implementation procedures
- School board presentations and approval
- Staff development focused on the appropriate design of curriculum and use of extended blocks of time for instruction

Attempting smaller changes minimizes the risks, they note, but creates less striking results and is also less likely to generate enthusiasm and commitment.

To be successful, the change must address a need, fit the teachers' situation, be focused, and include concrete strategies.

Resources

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